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## Closing—The Art of Proposing

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Many professionals are not satisfied with their ability to convert business prospects into clients. They feel comfortable inviting prospects to talk and eat together at breakfasts, lunches and dinners. They feel comfortable with conversation during the meals. However, when meals don't turn into deals, they feel fed up with the lack of results.

That may be because they've failed to take the next critical step to formalize the courtship with a proposal. Proposals communicate a request to do business – a shift from “doing lunch” to doing business. Effective proposals can allow the tasteful transition from dining to dollars. Successful proposals share two important characteristics: quantity and quality.

### INCREASING FREQUENCY

There are several main reasons that professionals are slow to make a proposal to their prospects. Some are ashamed to appear to be too hungry. Others assume that the prospect has learned enough during the dining to make an intelligent decision. Regardless of the reason, any delay in making proposals gives the competition time to take over.

The most productive approach is to make as many effective proposals as possible; and that means initiating proposals with every appropriate contact as soon as possible. Initiating proposals is quite simple.

After you've visited with your prospect enough to determine how you can offer value, it's time to say, “I've enjoyed getting to know you and your business. Now, I would appreciate the opportunity of meeting with you and your office for about 20 minutes. I want to provide you with a clear picture of what it will be like if you were to decide to use my services. Even if you don't need me right now, I think it's a good idea to discuss the details about how I work so that, if you should want to get started, all the specifics will be understood and we can avoid any unnecessary delays.”

Another approach is to ask how to get on the approved list. For larger clients, this is often a standard procedure and the process begins by requesting some forms. After the forms have been submitted, call to arrange a proposal.

For those professionals who find it uncomfortable to “ask for the order,” requesting an opportunity to make a proposal is a valuable, and possibly superior, alternative. Most professionals, being well-educated, are well-spoken; and many believe that they have the natural

ability to make an effective proposal. They're blessed if they do. For most of us, effective proposals require planning and practice. It's not necessarily natural to focus on the needs of your prospect rather than the services you offer. It's not necessarily natural to be comfortable communicating confidence in the quality of your work. And, it is by no means natural to prove your ability to offer superior service without appearing to make the same empty, worn-out "quality service" claims of your competitors.

## **MOVING TOWARD SATISFACTION**

Your goal in a proposal is to create a vision of how satisfying it will be to work with you in the future. You want to create a vision of safety, value and pleasure. You want to motivate your prospects to retain you by getting them excited about a future that is improved by your presence. Effective presentations are informative and inspirational.

Obviously, your proposal will be more effective if you have developed a "good deal" which is superior to that of the competition. Also, you will enhance your success if you accurately target your prospects and make proposals to the most fertile targets.

To maximize the effectiveness of your proposals, consider the following steps:

1. Thank your prospect for the opportunity of making a proposal and compliment your prospects: "I want to thank you for the opportunity of making a proposal to your firm. You are a significant force in this community and it's an honor to share this time with you."
2. Tell them the agenda of the presentation. This opens the door to the future. An agenda provides a feeling of security for your prospects. They'll know what to expect and that feels safe.
3. Tell them your expectations of your prospect's behavior following the presentation, e.g., "You'll have a clear understanding of our ability to serve your needs; and hopefully, that will motivate you to retain us;" or, "You'll feel comfortable in retaining us for the work you've described and hopefully you'll be motivated to ask us to proceed." Describing expectations tells your prospects how you want them to respond. If you don't tell them, they may not think of it or do it.
4. Introduce the participants of your presentation team. Even though you include resumes in writing, you should verbalize the experience and credits of your team. Introductions are an appropriate environment to communicate achievements without appearing boastful.
5. Discuss and confirm your understanding of your prospect's needs. Make sure you ask, "Are we on target regarding your needs?" and wait for a response. Obviously, if you're not clear on their needs, the proposal could be a waste of time.
6. Discuss the results you expect to achieve when you're retained. While you can't guarantee success, you can create a vision of anticipated results, i.e., "I expect we will close the transaction to your satisfaction within three months," or "I expect you to achieve your goals and maintain an ongoing relationship with the other parties."
7. Discuss the methods you will use to achieve the results. The difference between simply saying you'll be effective and proving it is significant. When you show the methods you will use, you give life to the process and instill confidence in your prospects.

Offer copies of internal documents such as checklists to show how you operate; provide graphic displays of procedures that you use to achieve results. Finish this segment by saying, “You can see how these methods will produce the desired results.” Then, look for affirmation. When you instill confidence, you provide for hope for a successful future, and that is inspirational.

8. Discuss your deal. Don’t be defensive about any aspect of your terms. Discussing business issues is part of your business; your ability to effectively communicate sensitive issues reflects well on your ability to serve your clients.

An effective approach is to take you prospect through your retainer agreement. As you cover each item, explain the business philosophy which supports the issue. Regarding payment of bills, you could say, “Of course, we anticipate our clients will pay us promptly. We are in business just like our clients and if we don’t get paid as agreed, it creates problems.”

9. Discuss the next step. It’s dangerous to conclude a proposal and wait for a response. Consider, instead, offering a follow-up action, i.e., reviewing some files at no charge or inviting your prospects to visit your office. Suggesting the next step offers positive interaction, and positive interaction brings you closer to the close.

10. Don’t give up. Even if you’re not hired, the proposal is not over. A turndown is not eternal. Business keeps changing. Timing is an important factor, so continue your contact in the form of mailings, invitations to seminars, introductions to quality contacts and any other method that communicates a continued interest in offering value to your prospects.

### **A MATTER OF PRESENTATION**

Quality proposals require practice. When you’re motivated, you’re willing to brush up on your writing and speaking skills. Try practicing in front of your partners. Practice in front of a mirror. Join toastmasters. Take speaking classes. Whatever method you use to improve your skills, here are some communications tips to help your proposals prevail.

Most of us are raised to believe that humility is appropriate behavior. If so, you may be uncomfortable using words that communicate your talent. Instead of saying, “I was able to help our client,” experiment with comments such as: “I researched the issues and determined that by using some creative structuring we could provide our client with everything she wanted.”

We’re also trained to understate our thoughts. Understatement reduces the information you offer. It’s important to communicate details using informative words that communicate as accurately as possible. Instead of saying, “I liked working on that deal,” try saying, “I felt honored to have the opportunity to participate in closing that deal.”

Another important technique in making effective proposals is filling your dialogue with examples. Practice telling stories about past experiences which bring life and therefore greater meaning to your message. Instead of saying, “I’ve got a good memory,” you could say: “As I was working on a recent matter, I remembered a comment my graduate school professor made 20 years ago while we were walking to the parking lot after class.”

Be sure to include examples of your beliefs as a part of your dialogue. While your retainer agreement does not specifically discuss issues of honesty, loyalty, positivism, sensitivity, etc., these qualities are clearly an important part of the total value you offer. One of my clients told me that he wouldn’t let his 12-year-old child pass for 11 at a movie theater to save the extra

cost of an adult ticket. He said, “You lose a little something when your integrity is ignored. The savings wouldn’t have been worth the loss.” When you tell your prospects stories about your beliefs, they’ll appreciate those qualities you bring to the relationship as an added benefit.

Quality proposals, when coupled with a good deal and effective targeting turn contacts into clients. However, proposals should not be limited only to prospective clients. Prospective referral sources deserve the same formal attention. You can customize the techniques listed above to motivate potential referral sources to refer prospects to you on a more regular basis.

An increase in proposals won’t result in less dining with prospects. As an entrée to the new relationship you’re going to want to break bread. However, if what you’re really hungry for is more closings, it’s the proposals that will bring you your just desserts.